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# Nicknames in Australia

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In den Sechzigerjahren publizierte, wegweisende soziolinguistische Studien (Brown und Gilman 1960, Brown und Ford 1961) zeigen, dass soziale Gruppen in verschiedenen Kulturen durch reziproke und nicht-reziproke Anredeformen charakterisiert sind. In diesen und späteren Arbeiten geht es vor allem um Anredepronomina, oft kombiniert mit Titeln und Namen; der vorliegende Artikel dagegen beschäftigt sich mit dem noch wenig untersuchten Gebiet der Spitz- und Kosenamen.

Der Artikel basiert auf einem Korpus von mehr als 1'200 Namen von Personen, die in der Stadt Sydney und ihrer Umgebung wohnen. Er zeigt, wie Spitz- und Kosenamen die soziale Wirklichkeit reflektieren und sie gleichzeitig mitgestalten. Im einzelnen geht es darum, wie reziproke Namengebung dazu dient, soziale Gruppen zu markieren und aufrechtzuerhalten, und wie nicht reziprok verwendete Spitz- und Kosenamen als Formen sozialer Kontrolle eingesetzt werden oder Unterschiede in Machtverhältnissen aufzeigen.

## Introduction

This paper examines nicknames in Australia according to three specific aspects. The first is the way in which nicknames may mirror, and also play a role in, the delineation and consolidation of dyads or larger groups. The second is the manner in which nicknaming can be employed as a form of social control, while the third is concerned with the question of who gives and who receives nicknames.

The springboard for the analysis is a notion first suggested by sociolinguists in the 1960s – Brown and Gilman (1960) and Brown and Ford (1961). In these studies it was proposed that the reciprocal or non-reciprocal use of address forms between two people is indicative of relations of power and solidarity between the two. For example, a pair addressing each other mutually by their first names (*John*  $\leftrightarrow$  *Sue*) clearly enjoys a different relationship to a dyad in which one member is addressed by the first name and the other by title + surname (*John*  $\leftrightarrow$  *Mrs Smith*). In the first dyad solidarity is in the foreground, while in the second there is a dimension of power, or at least deference, in the relationship. This notion of (non-)reciprocity, and its relevance for the dimensions of power and solidarity, underlies the present examination of nicknames in Australia.

## Data

The data for the analysis come from a corpus of interviews conducted between 1997 and 2000 among residents of the Sydney region (referred to as

the Sydney Region Names Corpus). In these interviews, people were asked (among other things) about what nicknames they had, who had given them these nicknames, who used them, and in what situations. Informants with children were asked comparable questions concerning their children's nicknames.

A total of 304 interviews were conducted, both by linguistics students at Macquarie University in Sydney as part of the fieldwork component for their degree, as well as by myself. Including the children of the informants, the interviews yielded data on the names of 498 people – 253 females (50.8 per cent) and 245 males (49.2 per cent). The birth dates of the informants span the twentieth century; the oldest informant was born in 1907 while the youngest three were born in the year 2000. Among them, the informants had over 1,200 nicknames.<sup>1</sup>

### Nicknames and groups

There are various ways in which nicknames reflect, as well as play a role in, the demarcation and identity of groups. Most involve some form of reciprocal nicknaming. This is especially obvious where nicknames are formed via analogy, e.g. *Spud* and *Bud* between friends, or where identical terms of endearment are used, e.g. *Chick* between husband and wife (Morgan et al. 1979; 61, Wierzbicka 1986; 356-7, Poynton 1990; 184-5.) Reciprocal nicknaming may function as a group-marker even when nicknames bear no linguistic similarity. Reciprocity is an underlying factor, for example, in the importance of a person having or not having a nickname in a social context in which nicknaming is common, e.g. in some school contexts (Morgan et al. 1979; 46). It can be particularly important in certain environments in which groups of people come together for a common purpose; sporting contexts, for example, are propitious for the creation and reciprocal use of nicknames.

The use of nicknames formed via analogy helps to delineate and even consolidate groups. Children and young people in particular favour analogous nicknames. Of the 12 groups in the corpus which made use of such forms, all had nicknames created either during childhood/adolescence (8) or early adulthood (4). Among family members we find the rhyming forms *Renée the Gay*, *Luke the Puke* and *Siobhan the Prawn* used by three siblings, as well as the alliterative forms *Critten Crittendom* (< *Christine McDonald*) and *Crunkles McCrunckledom* (< *Duncan McDonald*) used by a brother and sister. The latter invented these names as children, and use them still as adults when addressing each other on the telephone.

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1 This figure includes shortened versions of official names, e.g. *Liz* < *Elizabeth*.

Besides the family setting, analogous nicknames are also used at school as a way of marking relationships. Two schoolboys, for example, called each other *Nicko* and *Dicko* (from *Nicholas*, the first name of one, and *Dickson*, the surname of the other). One of the boys was also called *Spud* by a female friend whose nickname was *Bud*. A different group of adolescents used names which involved some kind of repetition of part of the name, e.g. *Dominoniminic* < *Dominic*, *Elizarenizerabeth* < *Elizabeth* and *Jenerenenny* < *Jenny*. These nicknames were part of a secret language which the school students were able to speak fluently (as they demonstrated during the interview). The use of a secret or play language is of course a method of group-marking par excellence; well-known examples are Pig Latin or the French *Verlan*. Such languages, although far more extreme in their force, function in a similar way to analogous nicknames: both tend to belong to the world of children/young people and both are linguistic devices used to stake out social territory.

Group identity may be continually renewed via the use of nicknames. Four male university students marked their friendship over and over again with different types of analogous nicknames. One set of nicknames “*had something to do with perversion*” and began with the first sound of their given names, e.g. *Knobjockey* (*knob* being slang for ‘penis’) < *Ninnart*. Another set was derived from the names of characters in a film script they were writing, e.g. *Bumpy* and *Chumpy*. A third set comprised compounds created from the key word from a particular incident + *Boy*, e.g. *Beam Boy*, derived from a cricket incident concerning the bowling of a *beamer* (‘ball aimed at the head of the person batting’).

Situations can also occur in which the nickname of one member of the group or dyad is modelled on the official name(s) of the other(s). In the corpus, one informant with the surname *Playle* was called *Le Play* by his French friend at university whose own name was *Le Creux*. Here, analogous names are still used to delineate a group, but not all the names are nicknames. In another case, Yugoslav-Australian teenagers modified *Ross*, the name of a non-Yugoslav friend, to *Roscanovic*. This was done in order to give the name a Slavic touch and thus make it sound like more theirs.

The most extreme manifestation of symbiosis is the mutual use of the same nickname. In the corpus this was mentioned three times in connection with partnerships, and once in connection with a friendship. One couple, for example, mutually called each other by the nickname *Woofs* (as well as *Woofie* and *Woofter*), derived from the onomatopoeic word (for speakers of English) for the barking of a dog. These nicknames came about due to an incident which took place while the man was proposing marriage to the woman. Throughout the entire proposal there was a dog nearby barking loudly, slowly, and continually. The incident not only engendered the mutual nicknames used by the husband and wife, but also some of their children’s

nicknames: *Big Woofter* for their daughter and *Little Woofter* for their son. In contrast to many of the analogous nicknames described above, these mutual nicknames were never name- or addressee-based (i.e. based on the name or characteristics of one of the bearers). Rather, the appellations were either event-based (as in the above example) or were generic terms of endearment (e.g. *Bubby*). This also corresponds to Poynton's findings (1990; 185) as well as to Morgan et al.'s one example (1979; 52).

In a wider context, the use of any nickname which is not pejorative may indicate adherence to a larger social group (Morgan et al. 1979; 46). This aspect is especially important for children and young people. A number of informants mentioned the social value of nicknames during their school years, for example:

It showed popularity, being part of a crowd.

(Female informant)

There was a feeling of belonging to a group.

(Male informant)

When I was in school I was always envious of the kids who had nicknames.

(Female informant)

Nicknaming can thus mark not only ties of family or friendship, as illustrated by the highly symbolic analogous nicknames, but also convey a more general feeling of belonging to the peer group.

The data further show that nicknames may arise when people come together for a common purpose. This can be observed in particular in the world of sports, where one way of fostering team spirit is via nicknaming. Twenty-eight instances of nicknames coined by team members or the coach were described. Often informants stated that the nicknames were only or primarily used in connection with the team. Certain forms were favoured, such as the typically Australian suffix *-o*. One informant, for example, a boy called *Trent Martin*, explained that he was called *Marito* at football because "*this other kid's called Trent too and they call him Trenno and we got mixed up*". Several names were rewards for sporting achievements, such as *Fitz hat trick* < *Fitzpatrick* (surname), the nickname given to one boy after he took three wickets in a row. The most frequently cited team sports were cricket (as in the above example) and football. (Unsurprisingly, 26/28 nicknames belonged to men.) One informant, who was known on the fields by a truncated form of his



surname, commented dryly: “*Playing football, no one would call you Carl*” (his first name).

According to the Sydney Region Names Corpus, the other main environment where nicknames flourish is the work place. Fifty instances of nicknames created by colleagues were cited, often in connection with work-related incidents. One informant, for example, was called *Puddles* because when he first started working as a mechanic he spilt a large quantity of oil. Another person was known in her office as *Probins*, a computer abbreviation of her name *P. Robinson*, while her colleague became *Be Keen* (< *B. Keen*). A third informant received the nickname *Doomben*, after a race-track. The informant, who worked in a betting office at the time, explained: “*To distract ourselves we all used to pretend we were a race-track.*” As with sports, solidarity also plays a role at work, although this form of solidarity, unlike on sports teams, does not seem to have much to do with the purpose at hand. Individuals are not generally rewarded with an honorary nickname for performing a task well (although they are reminded of their mistakes, as in the example of *Puddles*). In fact, solidarity appears to be more influenced by the fact that people find themselves together in the same situation. In the case of *Doomben*, the staff did not particularly identify with their work: inventing games and nicknames was simply a manner of alleviating boredom.

In the context of such team or work-related nicknames, a theory proposed by Morgan et al. (1979; 50), based on the work of the sociologist Goffman, may be relevant. They suggest that the “*intensity of the nicknaming system is related to the intensity of the social control structure*”. That is, the more controlled the external structure of an organisation is, the greater the propensity for nicknames. Morgan et al.’s example of a highly controlled social structure is the English boarding school. While Australian sports teams and working environments are hardly as rigid as that of a boarding school, the team is nevertheless a tight-knit enterprise strictly controlled by the coach, while work is a place where many adults spend a large part of their time, often following a fairly inflexible timetable. It seems plausible, and my data would suggest, that the fact of people being together in close proximity, and over extended periods of time – whether voluntarily or involuntarily – influences the extent of nicknaming.

### **Nicknames as a form of social control**

We have seen in the above discussion that nicknames can symbolise and even help create group cohesion. We have also seen, however, that nicknames can single out individuals, as in the examples of *Fitz hat trick* (praise for a sporting achievement) and *Puddles* (reminder of a mistake made at work). The latter examples reveal another function of nicknaming, namely that of pointing out what is socially desirable and what is not. Attention is

drawn in particular to traits or behaviour perceived as socially unacceptable. Morgan et al. (1979; 69) contend that nicknames can serve to “*highlight deviations from normality*”. The latter describe three main areas among British schoolchildren in which such deviations are stigmatised: “*body, mind and race*” (70). Examples are *Matchstick* (for someone skinnier than average), *Brainchild* (someone cleverer than average) and *Chocolate Drop* (a dark-skinned child in a predominantly white society) (70-3). These types of childhood nicknames are also well-attested in the Australian corpus. Analogous to *Matchstick*, *Brainchild* and *Chocolate Drop* we find, for example, *Chopsticks*, *Owl* and *Chocco*. Besides these three areas, schoolchildren also use nicknames to show that certain types of behaviour are undesirable. This function of nicknaming can be seen as a form of social control. In my corpus, one schoolgirl received the nickname *Sewer* < *Sue* at her new school because she was perceived as snobbish. “*It was an attempt to bring me down a peg or two*”, explained the informant. Another informant earned the nickname *Ouch* for being too rough in the playground.

Norm-reinforcement via nicknaming is also used by adults. In particular, parents use nicknames to target what they see as unacceptable behaviour on the part of their children. One mother, for instance, invented the nickname *O Great Salami* to comment on the bossiness of one of her sons. This nickname is derived via a process of hyponymy from an affectionate nickname of the child: *Saus*, short for *Sausage* (salami being a type, or hyponym, of sausage). When the boy was being particularly imperious, the mother would draw attention to this by ironically calling him *O Great Salami*. The same mother called her other son *Mario* derived from his given name *Murry*. This nickname, enunciated in an exaggerated Italian accent, was given because the boy often become agitated; such behaviour, from an Anglo-Australian perspective, is stereotypically Italian.

Another common way of reprimanding children is not via the use of a nickname but via its withdrawal. Here, the types of nicknames involved are not usually based on characteristics of the addressee but are name-based forms only, such as *Nick* < *Nicholas* or *Kaz* < *Karen*. The reversion to the full first name indicates, in the words of the informants, being “*in trouble*” or “*busted*”, or that parents are “*angry*” or “*going crook*”. This use of the full given name as an expression of disapproval was mentioned 29 times (in two of these cases both first and middle name were used together). Poynton (1990; 240), who also comments on this phenomenon, interprets it as marking a withdrawal of “*intimacy and affection*”, the use of the full first name correlating with an “*increase in social distance*”.

Besides schoolmates and parents, colleagues at work also draw attention to inappropriate behaviour or ineptitude at the work place. I have discussed the oil-spilling mechanic nicknamed *Puddles* above. Another informant was called

*Alzheimer's* (< *Alison*) in her office because she kept forgetting things, while a woman of Indian background, whose surname was *Atwal*, was given the name of *Atwali the Wandering Aboriginal* by colleagues to remind her that she could never be found at her office desk. Striking about the latter nickname as well as the example of *Mario* (above) is the association of undesirable behaviour with non-Anglo culture.

### Nickname-givers and nickname-receivers

If, as we have seen, nicknames are employed to serve certain social functions, such as that of drawing attention to unsuitable behaviour, then a question of particular pertinence arises, namely: who gives nicknames? The present section seeks to explore the role of the nickname-giver, as well as the relationship between the nicknamer and the nicknameee. Let us firstly take a look at an illustrative section from one of the corpus interviews:

Interviewer: *Who chose this name [Macca < MacDonald]?*

Informant: My boyfriend.

Interviewer: *And who uses it?*

Informant: Only him. He can get away with it.

In this brief dialogue, the informant indicates that the position of the nickname-giver is a privileged one. Indeed, Morgan et al. (1979; 115) write that “*the role of the name-giver is a position of considerable social influence and perhaps even of power*”. Evidence from the Sydney Region Names Corpus strongly supports this notion. One manifestation of the power relations between nickname-giver and nickname-receiver can be seen in the fact that the addressee often feels incapable of doing anything about an unwanted nickname. A number of informants described such a situation, as the examples below illustrate. In the first example, an informant relates her dislike of an abbreviated form of her first name given to her by office colleagues. In the second and third examples, informants describe teasing nicknames received during childhood.

*Liza < Elizabeth*: I didn't like it but I got used to it.

*Fartin' < Martin*: Kids can be cruel.

*Hetburger < Haidi*: It used to drive me to tears.

That nicknaming can be considered an act of power is also evidenced by the following examples. An informant named *Caroline* was called *Caz* and *Cazza* by a male friend, as well as *Crazy Caz* by a friend of her partner (“*because he hates me*”). Although she disliked these names intensely, she felt powerless to suppress them. Caroline, in turn, gave her brother-in-law the names *Do Bee* and *Ned Flanders*, designed to tease him for his correctness. (The first comes



from a line in an Australian children's television programme, *Romper Room*: "are you a Do Bee or a Don't Bee?", i.e. well- or badly-behaved, while *Ned Flanders* is a straight character in the American television series *The Simpsons*.) When asked whether he liked the nicknames, the brother-in-law's face-saving device was avoidance of a direct response. He answered "Well, it's humorous" with respect to the former, and "Well, you know what they're [in-laws] like. They're being facetious" with regard to the latter. In both the case of Caroline receiving nicknames from her peers, and Caroline's brother-in-law receiving nicknames from her, the naming is non-reciprocal, and the addressee feels they can do little about the names.<sup>2</sup>

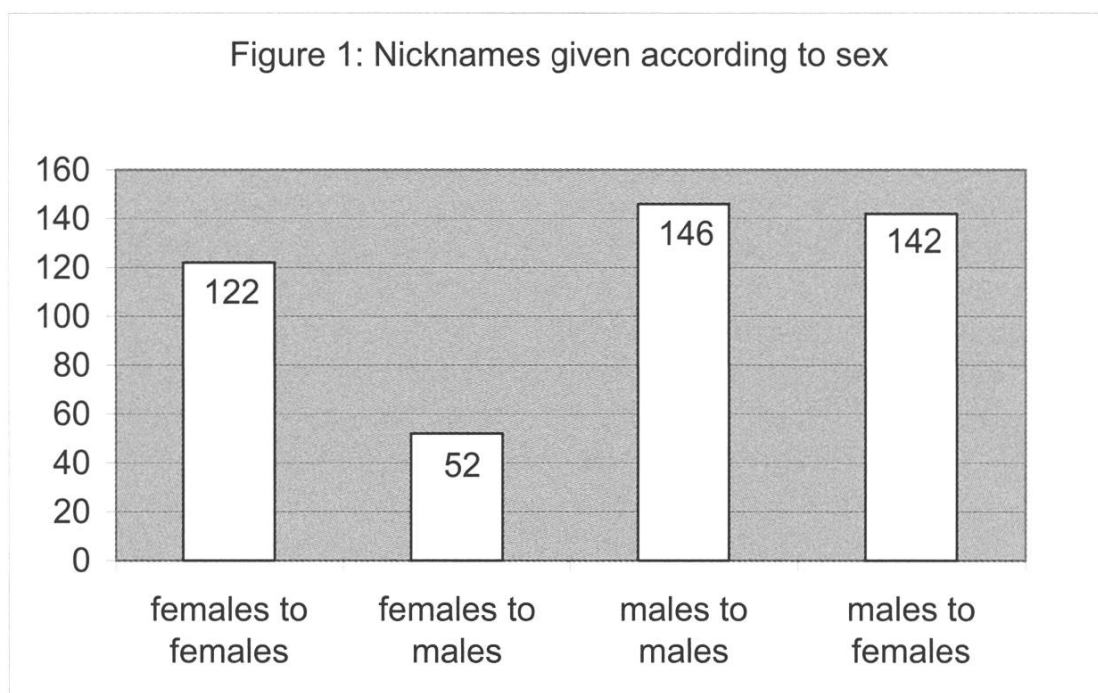
Some people do react, and create nicknames in return. Such dynamics can be seen in the following example from the corpus. In the context of a circle of family friends, one man nicknamed a girl a generation younger than himself *Clare Bear* (< *Clare*); she responded with *Geoffrey Bear* (< *Geoffrey*), "to get [him] back". (A similar tactic can be observed in connection with men inappropriately calling women *dear* or other terms of endearment at, for example, the work place: some women employ the strategy of reciprocating with the same term.) Responding in kind would appear to diminish, although not eliminate, the position of power held by the person who began the nicknaming. For however apt the second nickname may be, it remains a reaction. The person who nicknames first, by virtue of doing so, engenders both the original nickname and the response to it. (As Brown and Ford point out, even among dyads who change from mutual title + surname to mutual first name, one aspect of power will always remain, namely, who initiated the change in the first place [1961 in Hymes 1964; 240].)

Clear gender differences were observed with regard to the giving of nicknames. Although the sex of the name-giver was not always mentioned, there are enough instances of specification (a total of 462) from which we can draw some conclusions. As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, below, considerably more nicknames are given by men than by women.

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2 Another type of non-reciprocal nicknaming occurs in the case of students having secret nicknames among themselves for teachers, or workers for bosses. One reason for this, as an anonymous reviewer of this paper points out, may "possibly [be] a reaction to incontestable power". The crucial difference in such cases is that the nicknames refer to a third person; they are not terms of address. Such nicknames did not come to light in this particular corpus since informants were only asked to describe address forms.

Table 1: Nicknames given according to sex	
Females to females	122
Females to males	52
Total nicknames given by females	174
Males to males	146
Males to females	142
Total nicknames given by males	288
Total	462



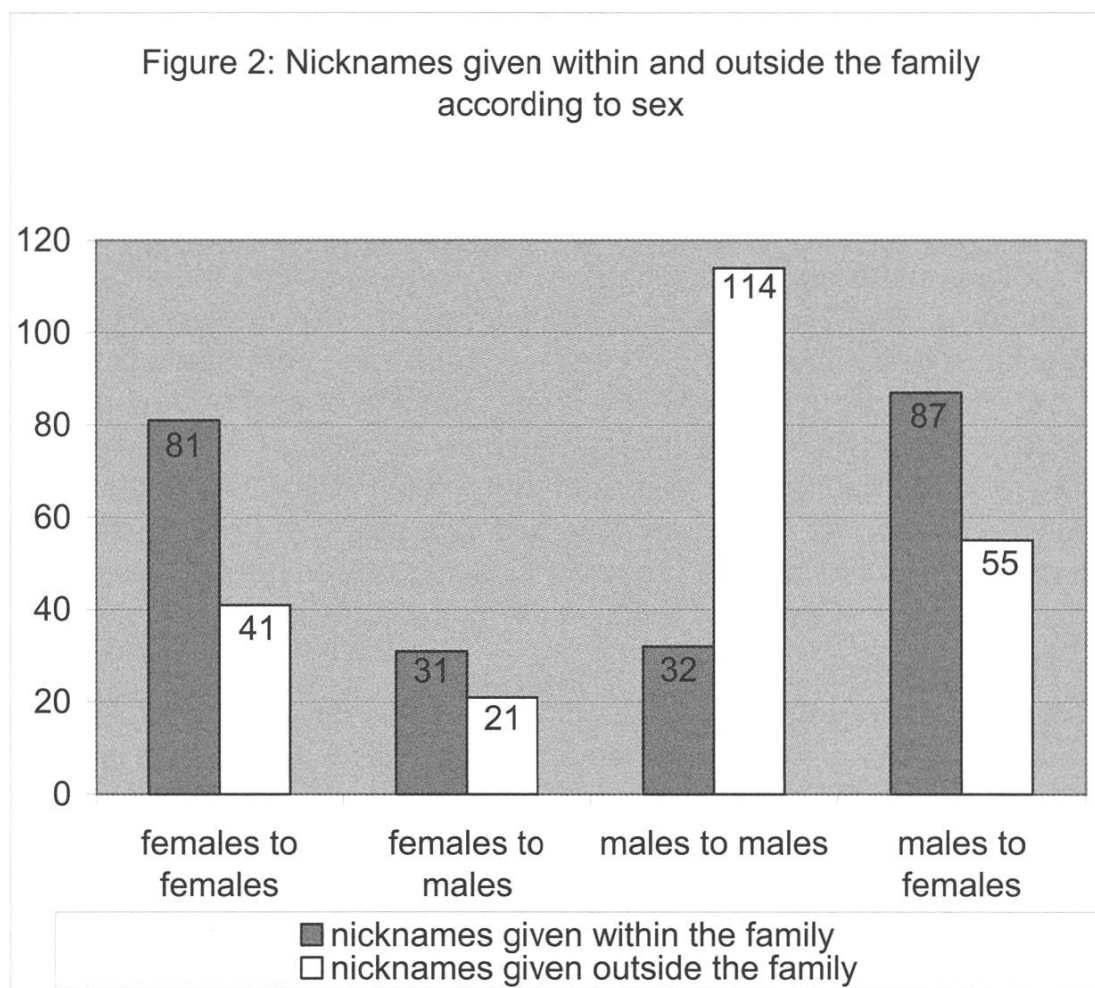
These figures are so striking – almost three times as many nicknames are given by males to females as by females to males – that I checked to see whether there might be differences depending on whether nicknaming occurred within or outside the family sphere. My hypothesis was that women, who play a more intense role in family life, may exercise the role of nickname-giver to a greater extent within the family. This hypothesis was only partly corroborated as the figures in Table 2 show.

Table 2: Nicknames given within and outside the family according to sex		
	Nicknames given within the family (including de facto partners)	Nicknames given outside the family
Females to females	81	41
Females to males	31	21
Total nicknames given by females	112	62
Males to males	32	114
Males to females	87	55
Total nicknames given by males	119	169
Total	231	231 <sup>3</sup>

It can be seen that more women give nicknames to family members (112 occurrences) than to people outside the family (62). Within the family, the overall numbers of nicknames given by males and females are also more even (112 given by women, 119 by men). Nevertheless (as is illustrated in Figure 2, below), the main pattern we see within the family is that nicknames are far more commonly given to females than they are to males, whether by females (81 occurrences) or by males (87 occurrences). Outside the family, the figure which is salient is the number of names given by males to males (114). This is over twice as many as the next highest figure (male > female: 55).

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<sup>3</sup> That there is an equal number of nicknames given within and outside the family is a coincidence.



Overall, these patterns of nickname-giving would appear to reflect two features of Australian society. First, the high number of male > male nicknames given outside the family sphere is consistent with a notion that Australian men, whether on the playing fields, at the work place, in the pub, etc. form close bonds, or ties of “mateship”. To a certain extent this mateship manifests itself, and helps to perpetuate itself, via nicknaming. Second, the high ratio of male > female nicknaming (142) compared to female > male nicknaming (52) (see Figure 1) clearly says something about the “nameability” of females. The way in which women are perceived, as shown by nickname usage, is referred to by both Lawson and Roeder (1986; 183) and Poynton (1990; 249), the latter contending that “*women are culturally defined as more contactable than men*”. In this context, it is probably also no coincidence that the two instances of prolific nicknaming cited in the corpus involved male name-givers. One informant noted that her “*uncle nicknamed everyone in sight*”, while a male informant commented: “*I like making up nicknames. I give everyone a nickname. I called Caroline Cazza.*” It would appear that one

manifestation of inequality between the sexes is that of males feeling more at liberty to “name” females than vice versa.

## Conclusion

To conclude we might say that nicknames and nicknaming are part of the social fabric, reflecting certain social realities, as well as performing – often with subtlety – specific social functions. We have seen that the reciprocal use of nicknames, whether identical ones (such as *Woofs* between husband and wife) or analogous ones (as in the case of *Nicko* and *Dicko* between friends), iconically marks relationships. But not only: the use of such nicknames is also a constant reminder to both group members as well as to outsiders of the existence of the relationship. In this manner, such nicknames actually help to cement relationships. Further, it would appear that any non-pejorative nicknames used reciprocally (i.e. also dissimilar nicknames), whether in the context of school, sports, or work, may play a role in group cohesion and solidarity.

Non-reciprocal nicknaming, on the other hand, is often used to draw attention to so-called “aberrations” of behaviour. This can be done in a very direct manner (such as with the clearly pejorative *Sewer*), as well as in more indirect ways (as in the case of *O Great Salami*, a parental reprimand infused with both humour and irony). Much parent-child nicknaming is characterised by non-reciprocity. This becomes especially obvious when we consider the range of names parents use with their children, but not vice versa (Poynton 1990; 240). Non-reciprocity is also an element found in male-female nicknaming. A striking difference can be observed between the number of names males give to females compared to the number females give to males. While reciprocal nicknaming often underlines ties of solidarity, non-reciprocal usage, as observed in both parent-child nicknaming as well male-female name-giving, says much about, and even contributes to the maintenance of, relations of power.

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